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American founding fathers recognized that an effective republican system of government would require an educated citizenry, but differed over the most suitable means for achieving that goal. Proposals made by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush to their respective State legislatures, all called for some degree of public education to provide quality political leadership. Proposals for a common public school system were generally rejected during this era, primarily because of the predominate belief that the authority of government, whether State or national, should be limited at all costs. (JH)

Grass Roots Guidebook Series

Sponsored by the CENTER FOR INFORMATION ON AMERICA

the American Public School

by Jack Allen

EA 002 433

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Preface

by Henry Steele Commager

From the beginning, education in America has had very special, and very heavy, tasks to perform. Democracy could not work without an enlightened electorate. The various states and regions could not achieve unity without a sentiment of nationalism. The nation could not have absorbed tens of millions of immigrants from all parts of the globe without rapid and effective Americanization. Economic and social distinctions and privileges, severe enough to corrode democracy itself, had to be fought. To our schools went the momentous responsibility of inspiring a people to pledge and hold allegiance to these historical principles of democracy, nationalism, Americanism, and egalitarianism.

Because we are a "new" nation we sometimes forget how very old are some of our institutions and practices. As Mr. Allen points out, the United States — today the oldest democracy in the world and the oldest republic — also has the oldest public school system in the world. The famous Old Deluder Satan law of 1647, quoted on page 60 of this Guidebook, which set up a system of community supported schools in Massachusetts Bay Colony was, in its day, something new under the sun. "As a fact," wrote Horace Mann, himself one of its later products, "it had no precedent in world history, and as a theory it could have been refuted and silenced by a . . . formidable array of arguments and experience. . . ."

Quite aside from the interest it should have for adult readers, the history of the public education movement which the 1647 law gave rise to is set forth by Mr. Allen in *The American Public School* in such a fashion as to give today's students in the nation's schools an opportunity to examine and think about the educational process through which they are passing. The book should help cultivate a better understanding of the American public school on the part of its products after they become voting members of society and in turn are responsible for development of the schools to meet future needs. Study of *The American Public School* in the schools themselves deserves hearty encouragement.

Let us look at the specific tasks which our faith in education has imposed on our schools. The first and greatest task was to provide an enlightened citizenry in order that self-government might work.

The second great task imposed upon education and on the schools was to create national unity. Difficult to do, yet we created unity

out of diversity, nationalism out of particularism. Powerful material forces — the westward movement, canals and railroads, a liberal land policy — sped this achievement.

But just as important were intellectual and emotional factors — what Lincoln called those "mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone." These were the contributions of poets and novelists, editors and naturalists, historians and jurists, orators and painters — and the medium through which they worked was the school.

The third task imposed on education, and particularly on the public schools, was that which we call Americanization. Each decade after 1840 saw from 2,000,000 to 8,000,000 immigrants pour into America. No other people had ever absorbed such large or varied racial and ethnic stocks so rapidly.

There is a fourth and final service the schools have rendered the cause of American democracy. This most heterogenous of modern societies — profoundly varied in racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious faith, social and economic interest — has ever seemed the most easy prey to forces of riotous privilege and ruinous division. These forces have not prevailed; they have been routed, above all, in the school rooms and in the playgrounds of America. An informed awareness of the role of the school should become part of the education of every American.

Editors' Foreword

The American Public School, by Dr. Jack Allen, is the second paperback in the Center for Information on America's Grass Roots Guidebooks series, produced in cooperation with the McGraw-Hill Book Company. Professor Allen is Chairman of the Division of Social Science at George Peabody College for Teachers, and an authority on the subject of this guidebook.

In accordance with the general pattern of the series, Part I of *The American Public School* presents the history and development of the movement for universal free education, an all-important component of the concept and practice of American democracy. Each chapter in Part I has at its conclusion several "discussion starters" to stimulate student participation. The section concludes with a descriptive bibliography.

In Part II, Professor Allen has assembled readings on the American public school which range from present times to such beginnings as the ordinance of 1647, passed by the Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, ordering each township of 50 or more householders to support a teacher to teach all children ". . . as shall resort to him to write and read." Included among recent comments are some of Dr. James B. Conant's reflections on contemporary American education.

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TOWNSEND SCUDDER
EDITOR, AND PRESIDENT OF THE CENTER

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PART ONE

2

EDUCATION FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

During the last half of the eighteenth century Americans developed an independent, self-governing nation and a distinctive culture. The leaders of the new republic were educated in religious republicanism by their parents, journeying tutors, schoolmasters in religious academies or in public schools. Despite such variety, these educational agencies managed to provide America with some of the best leaders in its history. William Smith, who is discussed in Chapter 1, observed in 1775 that it was most providential that God had waited until Americans had created the schools to train effective leaders before He called on them to preserve the liberal political rights of Englishmen.

Colonists of many religious backgrounds — Puritans, Dutch Reformers, Quakers, Virginia Anglicans, and back-country Presbyterians — had dreamed that men educated in the principles of virtue and in the political process of securing and maintaining such principles would lead both state and church wisely. The results were more than they could have hoped for. Americans proved sufficiently audacious and astute to overthrow British rule, create new state governments, and, ultimately in 1789, develop a federal constitution that established the basis for an extended republic.

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Basic Tenets of the New Republic

During the Revolutionary era the Founding Fathers created more than simply a government based on republican principles. They laid the foundation for the development of a republican American empire, an extended republic.

Under the new federal arrangement, Americans were required to be both sectional and national in their loyalties. Sectional loyalty to county or village or state would underlie the loyalty to the American nation so necessary for the nation to exist. A system of local, state, and national governments, responsive to the demands of the people, was to be based on the free consent of the governed. Such a complex form of government obviously required educated talent.

Public Education Under the Articles of Confederation

Even before the writing of the Constitution and the establishment of a federal system, Americans committed themselves to an extended republic served by educated men.

EDUCATION IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORY. By the Treaty of Paris, which concluded the American Revolution, the new United States came into the possession of extensive territory north of the Ohio and east of the Mississippi rivers. Soon the government decided that these lands would be an integral part of a republican empire, run according to republican principles. This was exemplified through the passage of the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. These acts established political doctrines that Americans adhered to as they took possession of the continent. First, settlers in the territory were to be granted certa' principles of representation. Second, territorial areas were to . given statehood and full equality with the older states when, because of population size or other factors, they were deemed ready for such responsibilities. Third, and most significant for education, a portion of land in the territory was to be designated for the establishment of schools to educate people and leaders for republican government.

The Northwest Ordinance was particularly important in furthering the idea of public education. One of its famous clauses stated that "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall be forever encouraged." In addition, the ordinance reserved land for the creation of colleges to serve the local area.

SCHOOL PROVISIONS IN EARLY STATE CONSTITUTIONS. The educational interests and concerns of the government were matched by a number of the first state governments. Typical was a provision in the constitution of North Carolina: "That a school or schools shall be established by the legislature, for the convenient instruction of youth, with such salaries to the masters, paid by the public, as

THE NATURE OF THE REPUBLIC. By *republic* Americans of the Revolutionary era meant a system of government in which men were ruled by laws enacted by their representatives. After the American Revolution both conservatives and liberals had to live by this guiding belief. Men might differ as to whether the right to vote might be given to all or to a limited number of citizens. But there was general agreement that a valid government must be based on representative principles. A republican government, in other words, if not completely democratic, was of necessity somewhat democratic. Both conservative and liberal agreed that the voice of the people is the voice of God and that provision should be made for some expression of the people's desires through governmental agencies such as the state legislatures and the House of Representatives in the Congress.

A people, given the power to choose their representatives, needed to have the principles necessary for republican government inculcated in their youth. The schools, it was believed, could provide for teaching these principles. Some of the most respected voices of the time, sensitive to the new needs of American society, regarded education as one of the primary instruments through which republican ideals were to be realized.

THE IDEA OF AN EXTENDED REPUBLIC. One tenet of republican thought, that had broad acceptance in the eighteenth century, was violated by the Founding Fathers when they produced a national constitution in 1789. These makers of our Constitution strove to create a large republic. Political theorists, such as the Frenchman Montesquieu, had argued that a republic covering a large area or containing a large number of people was impossible. When a republic overextended itself, reasoned the theorists, the necessities of administration led to aristocratic control and then to a centralized, monolithic state. Such a government would threaten and eventually destroy the rights of the people.

To overcome this problem, Americans developed a new political theory known as *federalism*. In brief, federalism sought to create governments within governments. Whereas the states and local agencies would remain highly responsive to the will of the people, the national government would prevent any dominant pressure group or faction from violating the basic rights of the minority. Americans hoped in this manner to build an American empire based on republican political ideals. Equally important, it was hoped that such an extended republic would prevent the tyranny of the majority, a tyranny toward which republics in history had shown some tendency.

Under the new federal arrangement, Americans were required to be both sectional and national in their loyalties. Sectional loyalty to county or village or state would underlie the loyalty to the American nation so necessary for the nation to exist. A system of local, state, and national governments, responsive to the demands of the people, was to be based on the free consent of the governed. Such a complex form of government obviously required educated talent.

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may enable them to instruct at low prices; and all useful learning shall be encouraged . . . in one or more universities." The purpose of such provisions was clear. The means for achieving the goal were still to be determined.

Plans for Republican Education

The republic conceived by Americans in 1789 would be ruled by an aristocracy of talent and virtue, not by an aristocracy based on family ties or "divine right." Political leaders were to emerge from the people, and the people themselves would be capable of responsible political action.

Education, as noted earlier, was an integral part of the dream. Precisely how education could function most effectively, however, was a subject of discussion, even before the achievement of independence. There were those with plans to offer. Three of the best known and most representative plans were offered by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Rush.

AN EARLY PROPOSAL BY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. Benjamin Franklin was one of the first American leaders to sense the need for properly educated political servants. A self-made man, Franklin placed a high value on education. Throughout his long and distinguished career as publisher, philosopher, scientist, diplomat, and statesman he never ceased to learn nor to value learning in the service of man and country.

In 1749 Franklin proposed that an academy be created in Philadelphia. His plan was issued under the modest title, *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania*. Appealing to history, Franklin argued, "The good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise men of all Ages, as the surest Foundation of the Happiness . . . of Commonwealth." Schools to accomplish this in America were a matter of public concern, for they "supply the succeeding Age with men qualified to serve the Public." Consequently, an educational plan was offered in order that the "citizens of Pennsylvania may obtain the Advantages arising from an Increase of Knowledge, and prevent as much as may be the mischievous Consequences . . . [of] Ignorance."

Although Franklin's proposal was directed toward Pennsylvanians, its influence was felt in all the colonies.

JEFFERSON'S EDUCATIONAL IDEAS. Three decades after Franklin's proposal, Thomas Jefferson introduced into the Virginia Legislature *A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge*. It was a

plan for a system of selective public education. Although not accepted by the legislature, it is interesting to note the substance of Jefferson's ideas.

Under the plan all children were to receive three years of elementary school training. Each year one promising boy of poor parents was to be selected from each elementary school to attend a grammar school in preparation for college. After some six years in grammar, or secondary school, the top half of the students would go to college at the state's expense. The purpose of the college was to train the leaders necessary in a republican state. Jefferson's plan was a selective process, but it offered at least some opportunity for the common man to rise to a position of leadership.

Almost forty years later Jefferson's friends submitted a second plan for a system of public education. It was still a selective plan, but somewhat less so than Jefferson's earlier proposal.

Thomas Jefferson apparently believed that three years of common schooling was sufficient to create a wise American electorate which could choose its "aristocracy of talent" from among the natural leaders of society. It was a limited view of public education, as seen from the vantage point of our own day, but radical for its time. Indeed, as literary historian Perry Miller reminds us, we must be careful in using Jefferson as a representative figure. Jefferson and his older contemporary in the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin, held beliefs that were quite unlike those of most Americans of the time. Americans generally were far more religious than such secular-minded philosophers as Jefferson and Franklin.

BENJAMIN RUSH AND EDUCATION IN A REPUBLIC. Dr. Benjamin Rush was a more religious and, probably, a more representative American thinker than Jefferson or Franklin. Rush was a graduate of Princeton University and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. Upon his return from Scotland he accepted a position in the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. For the remainder of his life he endeavored to persuade the people of Pennsylvania, torn by religious differences, to establish a system of common schools.

Rush's educational plan, presented in 1786, was entitled *Thoughts upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*. It was a call for a common education that would instill the spirit of patriotism. Rush felt that men educated in Europe would echo the values of a decadent European social order. He argued that a system of common schools, "by producing a general and more uniform system of education," would "render the mass of the people more homoge-

neous." Such schools, he thought, would make it possible for a "supreme regard to their country" to be "inculcated upon" all students.

But the proper mode of educational indoctrination in a republic could not be authoritative. The same education which, in Rush's words, would convert "men into republican machines" would encourage the open-minded scientific attitude necessary for progress. Rush believed education for a republic should not only perpetuate republicanism but provide for its progressive improvement.

Rush's educational schemes, like Jefferson's, were selective in character. In his *Plan for Establishing Public Schools in Pennsylvania* (1796) Rush suggested three stages of education to tie "the whole state . . . together by one system of education." There would be a free reading and writing school for each township. Four colleges, or secondary schools, would prepare men for the university. The capstone would be a single public university to train the aristocracy needed for political leadership.

Republican Political Theory Weakens the Common School Idea

Neither Jefferson in Virginia nor Rush in Pennsylvania was successful in the realization of his ideas for a common public school system. The belief was still strong that education was a private matter. Perhaps a more important block to their ideas was a serious limitation in political theory. While a republican-minded people saw the necessity of government, they feared that depraved leaders would use government for selfish purposes. Consequently, they sought to limit the effective authority of the state. This prevented Americans of the Republican era, the age of the Jeffersonian political revolution, from holding firm allegiance to the ideals of a centralized system of common schools, whether state or national.

A VIRGINIA EXAMPLE. This limitation in Jeffersonian political theory was well illustrated in Virginia. In 1817 Charles Fenton Mercer, a Federalist, made an educational proposal in the state legislature. At the time, Virginia was adding to its literacy fund, originally created in 1796. This fund enabled paupers to be supported in predominantly private schools. How the money was spent was left to local authorities. Mercer objected to such a haphazard system of education. As a Federalist, who followed the political ideas of Alexander Hamilton, he believed that men need not fear strong centralized government. Government served positive functions. Mercer's proposal was for free elementary schools and centralized planning—in effect, a public system of elementary education.

Members of the Virginia Legislature, loyal to Jeffersonian principles, defeated Mercer's proposals. Money continued to be given to the local community leaders to use as they saw fit.

DECENTRALIZATION IN MASSACHUSETTS. Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, a system of elementary and secondary schools was in existence for most of the eighteenth century. Application of republican educational theory helped to create a situation in which the local district school, subject to no external control, became dominant. In 1789 the Old Deluder Act was modified. Towns with fifty families were required to provide an English school for only six months, while towns with 100 families were required to provide an English school for twelve months. Towns with 150 families were required to provide a grammar school for six months, in addition to an elementary school for twelve months. Only those towns with 200 families were to provide elementary and grammar schools for twelve months. This action freed the towns from the educational standards that had heretofore been matters of state law. Later, in 1824, all but seven towns were freed from state-enforced obligations. Finally, in 1827, all education was turned over to local districts.

Republican Ideas Are Altered by a Democratic Transformation

Given the tendencies exhibited in such states as Virginia and Massachusetts, how shall we evaluate republican educational ideas? Republicans had produced strong justifications for a common set of schools, the strongest being that no people could be both free and ignorant. As President George Washington admonished in his Farewell Address: "Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened."

The chief weakness in republican ideas was the emphasis on the training of an aristocracy of talent. Any aristocracy is a minority and might unknowingly subvert government to private ends. One of these subversions might be the use of a common set of schools to arrive at personal advantage. As long as education remained an instrument for controlling the people, an instrument to be used by an aristocracy, there were just reasons for forebodings. Therefore, in decentralized elementary schools and in privately controlled academies, the power of central magistrates was limited.

But even as private academies grew and the state system of Massachusetts disappeared, countervailing forces and new movements were

making themselves felt in American society. In older and newer states alike, provisions were inserted into constitutions for the support of schools. Some state legislatures moved to establish permanent school funds through the sale of public lands, license fees, direct appropriations, and other means. In 1812 New York created the first state superintendency of common schools, and all schools in the state were placed under the supervision of this official.

But most important of all, the United States itself was about to experience another era of basic social, political, and economic change. The nation was preparing to embark on an experiment in political democracy. To the experiment Americans brought a confidence in themselves and in the power of education. In the new context education would also need to become more democratic.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. The Northwest Ordinance mentions "religion" and "morality," as well as "knowledge," as reasons for support of schools. What implications might be drawn from such reasoning within the context of American culture in 1787?

2. The Founding Fathers, in establishing a plan of republican government, seemed to recognize the need in such a government for a broadly conceived system of education. Why, then, was nothing included in the federal constitution on the subject of education?

3. Thomas Jefferson is universally regarded as one of the great champions of the democratic ideal. How could he rationalize his democratic principles with his limited view of public education that would select only a few for more than meager amounts of schooling?